DIGGING IN

NOVA SCOTIA HORTICULTURE FOR HEALTH NETWORK

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The Nova Scotia Horticulture for Health Network is a coalition of people interested in supporting horticulture for health initiatives through resource-sharing, exchange of practices/knowledge, and networking.

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Photo top right: L. Fleming

Therapeutic Activities for Youth Sensory Gardens

Text by Katie Grimes, MAT, HTR
Photos by L. McFarlane on Unsplash & K. Grimes

Gardening is, by its very nature, a multi-sensory experience. Dig into most gardens, and the participant might feel soft or gritty soil in their hands as an earthy scent fills the nostrils. Cool water may cascade from a hose, changing the color and consistency of the soil, filling a receptacle, or leaving droplets on leaves. Colorful flowers, nuanced shades of foliage, and plant structures that range from wispy to hefty may catch the eye or tickle the ear when moved. Even if the plants are not edible, the tongue tastes what the nose smells, and the five external senses are engaged. Simultaneously, the internal senses of the vestibular system, interoception, and proprioception are also tapped by many typical gardening experiences. Walking or navigating, turning, resting, squatting, bending, lifting, and noting one's internal responses to temperature, humidity, hunger or thirst, and safety stimulate or soothe these internal senses, addressing the eight senses in total.

What then defines a Sensory Garden and makes it aptly suited to address therapeutic goals? Intentional design and Intentional use.

Dr. Amy Wagenfeld, PhD, OTR/L, SCEM, FAOTA, expands on these intentions in a new resource. *Youth Sensory Gardening Manual* written by Wagenfeld and published online by the American Horticultural Society (AHS) is intended to support and improve children's health. Collaborating with Kids Cancer Connection, AHS will provide over 200 hospitals with the manual, and it is available free to others.

The manual provides science-based information on the eight senses, sensory systems, sensory integration and sensory processing in an easily understandable format. This information provides the foundation for developing or expanding gardens (at hospitals and other locations) so that gardens are inclusively sensitive to all children's abilities and varying degrees of sensory tolerances - hyposensitivity or hypersensitivity. It promotes self-regulation challenges, and fun, positive experiences in a garden.

For each of the 8 senses, Wagenfeld gives specific guidelines for garden design, passive and active experiences that occur there, and a social story that a facilitator can use to lead a participant through a sensory engagement. This social story taps participant self-awareness and honors their decision to seek or retract from the sensory input; to like or dislike the experience.

When working in sensory gardens, a therapeutic horticulture practitioner benefits from having a variety of intentional activities as tools, especially when engaging the same children or the same group of children in multiple sessions. The following section provides descriptions of multisensory-based activities for children and youth that can be adapted to meet different goals.

Scavenger Hunts: Scavenger hunts invite children to come into close contact with a variety of plant materials for sensory exploration. Variations include a color or shape hunt to engage sight; a texture hunt for the sense of touch; an aroma hunt for sweet, floral, spicy, or grassy smells; an underground scavenger hunt to encourage soil play; or a hunt for sun and shade in the garden to tap the interoceptive sense. Facilitators may direct children to look for plants that match descriptions or color/texture swatches, hide small objects among the plants, or keep prompts open ended.

Sensory Trails and Sensory Walks: Sensory trails and sensory walks provide external sensory experiences while activating the proprioceptive and vestibular senses as children navigate them. The activity may be a determined texture-rich pathway that includes quadrants of crushed stone, mulch, pebbles, and mud, or it can refer to a walk that guides children to tune in or remove a particular physical sense. Variations include a listening walk, a blindfolded walk, a noise canceling walk, a texture walk for hands or feet, or a pathway overflowing with plants of different textures that contact the legs.

Bouquets & Assemblages: Making bouquets for other people brings an element of empathy to the project and often motivates children who might otherwise refrain from tactile experiences. Beyond flowers to stimulate the sense of sight, bouquets may be themed to include herbs for scent, ferns or foliage for texture, rattling seed pods for hearing, or even fruit or vegetable kabobs for taste. Gathering the bouquet from the garden is an important part of the process, engaging the vestibular and proprioceptive senses.

Journaling: Journaling is one of the best ways to tap into interoception. "Sit Spot" (Young et al, 2016) is a technique that brings the participant to the same location repeatedly. Upon each session, the journalist may note the weather and internal sensations as well as what their external senses perceive. Varying the journal topics and materials maintains children's interest; suggestions include responding with color to temperatures or sounds; using magnification tools to zoom in or out; imagining future life cycles; using chalkboards; drawing while blindfolded; or making texture rubbings.

Heavy Work & Play: Children need resistance not only to build muscle, but also to build awareness of how to flex or rest their muscles and nerves. Proprioceptive awareness is closely tied to self-regulation. Many deep work activities are inherent to gardening tasks, like digging and carrying water jugs, but infusing these activities with play and games helps to make gardening a joy. Playful options include "beat the clock" water jug races or relays; dedicated digging beds for imaginative play; stomping compost to a catchy beat or tune; and tests of superhero strength like safely lifting stones or pulling vines from fences.

Related Activity Plans for Sensory Gardens from the Therapeutic Horticulture Activity Database:

Scavenger Hunts:
Fleming, L. Nature's Colors Game
Fleming, L., Bethel, M. Game: Gathering Nature's Treasures
Fleming, L., Bethel, M. Matching Game: Photos to Live Plants

Sensory Trails and Walks:
Fleming, L., Carrol, K. Lavender Labyrinth: Multi-Session, Multi-Group Installation
Grimes, K. Conflict Resolution Sensory Path
Stivland, G. Outdoor Obstacle Course: Swinging & Spinning

Bouquets & Assemblages:
Fleming, L., O'Connor, E. Flower Vase Bouquet: Hand-Held Method
Fleming, L. Foliage Bouquet
Fleming, L., Bethel, M. Sensory Bin

Journaling:
Bethel, M., Fleming, L. Don't Pick the Flowers, Draw Them
Stark, B. Teenagers' Field Guide

Heavy Work & Play:
Grimes, K. Watering Can Pass-Off
Relf, D., Morgan, S. Preparing Soil in Raised Beds
Sherman, G. Pounding Pansies

Sensory gardens serve as powerful therapeutic spaces where intentional design meets meaningful activity to support the developmental, emotional, and sensory needs of children. By integrating therapeutic horticulture practices into thoughtfully designed environments, these gardens become vital tools for sensory integration, self-regulation, and inclusive learning. As demonstrated by successful models worldwide, sensory gardens hold significant potential for schools, healthcare settings, and community programs seeking to foster holistic child well-being. Continued investment in and research on these spaces can deepen our understanding of their impact, helping to ensure that every child has access to the healing and empowering experiences nature can provide.

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Kathryn E. Grimes (Katie) *is a Registered Horticultural Therapist with an MA in Teaching and a concentration in special education who has over 2 decades of experience in creating and leading educational and therapeutic programs for all ages and abilities in the context of community gardens, city parks, early learning environments, zoos, and public gardens. She is a writer, workshop presenter, and curriculum and garden designer who volunteers as an Advisory Committee member of Florida Horticulture for Health Network. Lesley Fleming, HTR, contributed to this article.* Reprinted with permission.

Series: Part 5 of 5

Practitioner Tool: Therapeutic Horticulture Goals with THAD Activity Examples: Sensory Domain

Text by Lesley Fleming, HTR
Photo by Goodplayguide.com
Original Publication: Fleming, L. (2025). Practitioner Tool: Therapeutic Horticulture Goals with THAD Activity Examples: Sensory Domain. *Cultivate,* 5(4).

Sensory stimulation is a foundational element within horticultural therapy and therapeutic horticulture because of the experiential nature of plant and gardening activities that are part of practice. In more recent years, HT/TH body of knowledge has expanded to include less well-known senses of – proprioception, interoception and vestibular sense of balance, along with the primary five senses (Fleming & Grimes, 2024; Gabaldo, 2019; Fleming et al., 2025). This reflects greater awareness across therapeutic disciplines of sensory processing, sensory integration therapy and self-regulation interventions related to sensory inputs (Ayers, 1972; Gomez et al., 2021; Dean, 2019).

"Therapeutic goals are an essential component of therapeutic horticulture practice. In this fifth in the 5-part series, therapeutic goals are identified by the sensory health domain, intended to be used as an index for identifying possible goals. Previously published articles have covered cognitive/intellectual, physical, psychological/emotional and social health domains. In each article and domain, examples from THAD (therapeutic horticulture activities database) have been selected to demonstrate applications for use in therapeutic horticulture interventions.

Setting therapeutic goals is based on client assessment and need, working toward specific outcomes, which can be measured informally or clinically charted. Achieving desired health outcomes requires intention, therapeutic techniques and client engagement.

Therapeutic goals can fall into more than one health domain. The THAD examples identify multiple therapeutic goals in each of the five domains for each activity, though typically only one or two would be emphasized in a given session.

A *Journal of Therapeutic Horticulture* article, Therapeutic Horticulture and Its Therapeutic Goals: Expanding the Scope and Practice Through the Therapeutic Horticulture Activities Database and Its Use of Health Domain-Specific Goals organizes TH goals also using health domains, referring to functional and goal areas, not specific therapeutic goals (Fleming et al., 2025).

This series—Practitioner Tool—identifies specific therapeutic goals intended to expand practitioner knowledge and applications" (Fleming, 2025a, b, c, d).

Sensory Health Domain: Therapeutic Goal + THAD Activity Examples

Goal Areas	Therapeutic Goal	THAD Examples
Visual	Use visual sense to distinguish between colors	Color Wheel Challenge with Plants (Fleming, Bethel & Hildinger, 2024)
Tactile	Expand tactile skills across populations & with visually impaired people	Seed Mosaic Heart (Fleming & Bethel, 2025)
Gustatory	Evaluate & distinguish between flavors	Blackberry Iced Tea - Depression (Fleming, 2025)
Olfactory	Use sense of smell for task	Stargazer Lilies at the Kentucky Oaks (Supports Breast Cancer Awareness) (Fleming & Bethel, 2025)
Auditory	Strengthen auditory skills	Sounds from Gardening (Fleming & Carroll, 2025)
Interoception	Expand recognition of interoception internal signals like itchy skin, avoidance (heart racing)	Black-Eyed Susans @ the Preakness Stakes (Fleming, 2025)
Proprioception	Improve proprioception body awareness; perform tasks without looking at hands or feet for example	Spots, Dots & Stripes on Variegated Leaves (Fleming & Hildinger, 2025)

Goal Areas	Therapeutic Goal	THAD Examples
Vestibular Sense	Demonstrate improved modulation of vestibular sense of balance	Sensory Bin (Fleming & Bethel, 2024)
Self-Regulation	Practice self-regulation	Foliage Bouquet (Fleming, 2025)
	Develop autonomic and appropriate responses to sensations	Bird Feeder (Mortada & Fleming, 2024)
	Self-select appropriate sensory break	Fascination with Fasciation (Hildinger, Fleming, Morgan, Stark & Sterling, 2025)
	Practice swinging, bouncing, spinning to regulate sensory response	Outdoor Obstacle Course: Swinging & Spinning (Stivland, 2024)
Sensory Tolerance	Increase tolerance for non-preferred task	Earth Day Hanging Kokedama (Sherman, 2023)
	Expand ability, tolerance and willingness to engage in sensory activities	Playing with Soil, Sand or Water (Fleming & Stivland, 2024)
	Address sensory challenges like defensiveness to tactile, olfactory, or gustatory stimuli	Foot & Hand "Bath" with Fresh Herbs (Fleming & Relf, 2023)
	Attend to seated activity for 10 min. following sensory activity	That's Bananas (Carroll & Fleming, 2024)
Sensory Motor	Expand sensory motor skills	Acrostic Nature Poetry (Thorbes, 2025)
	Practice hand-eye motor integration	Balancing Stones/Creating Rock Towers (Clark, Shortridge & Schultz, 2025)
	Practice sensory integration using several senses	Origami Calendar with Seeds & Pressed Flowers (Miyake, 2023)
	Practice integrating mind-body	Bookmarks with Dried Flowers (Fleming, Ellis & Bethel, 2025)
	Increase confidence in responding to sensory inputs or adverse reactions	Beach Sunflowers & Resiliency (Fleming, 2025)
	Practice being outside to tolerate sensory elements (wind, rain, soil)	Propagating Herbs by Division (Fleming & Relf, 2023)
	Enhance mood through sensory stimulation	Spooky Succulent Gardens (Brown, 2025)
	Identify personal alertness level	Care of Houseplants (Sullivan & Fleming, 2023)

With the publications of THAD (therapeutic horticulture activities database), there is evidence of HT/TH practitioners including greater number of goals in the sensory domain. As noted previously, the role of sensory inputs to human functioning, especially self-regulation, sensory integration critical to developmental skills particularly for children, and sensory health challenges experienced across populations are emerging as important factors for HT/TH interventions. Practice is now identifying therapeutic sensory goals addressing trauma, military health challenges – mental health and sexual assault, along with medical diagnoses involving sensory processing deficits (Autism CRC, 2024; Whitehouse et al., 2020; Polackova et al., 2023). Developments in therapeutic horticulture practice are advancing particularly in this health domain. A recent publication, *Youth Sensory Gardening Manual* (2025) provides insights into the connections between gardening, sensory health domain and interventions that can be incorporated.

This listing of goals is not definitive, but is intended to broaden practitioner understanding and application of therapeutic goals for therapeutic horticulture delivered to multiple populations.

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Lesley Fleming, HTR has delivered therapeutic horticulture to a variety of populations using specific therapeutic goals. She has led the THAD advisory team in developing the on-line database of therapeutic horticulture activities and their correlated therapeutic goals across health domains. Leah Diehl, RLA, HTM and Katie Grimes, HTR, MAT contributed to this article.

Activity: Nature Goal: Sensory Populations: Specialized Populations

TH Activity Plan – Honey Bee-Havior

Text by L. Fleming, HTR & Maureen Bethel, DEC, BA, BEd, CAE
Photo by PerfectBee
Adapted from Philadelphia Orchard Project. (n.d.). *Honey Bees.*

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will engage in hands-on sensory activities focused on the nature of honey bees.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Strengthen cognitive function, executive function &/or decision-making; engage sense of curiosity

Physical: Strengthen hand-eye coordination; practice "risky" behavior for developing sense of independence

Psychological/Emotional: Modulate behavior, thoughts & emotions; practice self-regulation (i.e. coping with apprehension, fear of being stung)

Sensory: Identify deficits in senses (if any); be mindful of other senses addressing sensory deficits; use sensory stimulation

Social: Practice pro-social behavior; practice sharing materials with others in group setting

Materials

Educational materials on honey bees (i.e. features, life cycle, habitat), audio device

Straws, juice, honey

Stiff bristled hairbrush, baby powder

Variety of fruits & vegetables with varying sizes, shapes

Bees wax, honeycomb, hexagonal blocks/shapes

Models (i.e. clay, plastic) of honey bee queen, drone, worker

Scent infused cotton balls or spray (lemon or banana scented)

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Gather materials.
2. Facilitator begins session by suggesting participants learn about honey bees & try being honey bees. Facilitator uses guided imagery, educational materials & sensory activities. Select several aspects of bees to focus on & use prompts and props to engage participants.
3. Suggested facilitator verbal prompts: Let's walk outside listening for honey bees & the buzzing sound they make (actual walk or guided imagery). *Facilitator plays a track of honey bees.*
4. Facilitator describes how honey bees collect sweet nectar from flowers using straw-like tongues called proboscis; *then distributes straws, juice & honey & encourages participants to try "collecting their nectar", simulating bees' proboscis.*
5. Honey bees pollinate plants by flying in nature, having powdery pollen stick to their hairs, taking it back to their hives. *Facilitator shares course hairbrush/bristles & baby powder simulating how pollen sticks to their hairs, taking it back to their hives.*
6. Honey bees (& other insects) pollinate fruit & vegetables worldwide. *Facilitator distributes fruits & vegetables to be touched, smelled, heard (tapping fruit for ripeness (& if possible tasted).*
7. Honey bee hives, their homes, are built from their beeswax & are made from 6-sided hexagons. *Facilitator shares bees wax granules, hexagonal blocks & honeycomb.*

8. There are 3 main types of honeybees in a hive, each has a different job. Queen (usually only one) who lays the eggs, drones who mate with the queen, & workers who collect pollen & care for the hive. *Facilitator distributes clay models of the 3 types of honey bees.*
9. Honey bees communicate, like other insects, using pheromones which are odors they emit; lemon scent helps locate hive; banana scent is an alarm for potential intruders. *Facilitator distributes scent infused cotton balls or uses lemon or banana scented sprays.*

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: This TH activity is adapted from a booklet created for students with visual impairments. This THAD can be adapted for all populations using the sensory activities related to honey bee habits. Infusing humor and exaggerated actions can *be* effective for engaging participants, pun intended.

Sensory activities involving the eight senses can address deficits, challenges or interest in senses that may be compromised such as visual impairment or hearing loss. Hands-on sensory activities offer experiential opportunities to explore areas that may be considered challenging by participants. Such is the case with the activities identified in this TH activity. Most often discussed as benefits of sensory play for children, similar benefits can be evidenced in other populations. These include developing cognitive, language and motor skills, fostering social interactions, and experimentation (Cleveland Clinic, 2025). Sensory activities can involve all senses, particularly the vestibular and proprioception sensory systems.

When considering sensory play or sensory activities for adults, the literature cites engaging multiple senses simultaneously, which is particularly important for enhancing cognitive function, building and strengthening neural connections positively impacting learning, memory and emotional regulation. Many populations have challenges in these areas including adults on the autism spectrum, intellectually disadvantaged individuals, seniors, and people living with dementia among others. Also noted are benefits of stress relief, relaxation and mindfulness that sensory activities can provide.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts. If tasting will be a part of the session, prior approval and identification of swallowing, allergy or medicine contraindications should be done.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Facts on bees are plentiful online. Note that honey bees are just one type of bee worldwide. Information on hive maintenance, seasonality, swarming, waggle dance, and complex social structures are relevant to this session.

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Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2025.
TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2025.


Pallet Pleasers

Text by Lesley Fleming, HTR
Photos by L. Fleming & J. Poindexter

Pallets can be an invaluable resource for garden items. Often free of charge, they can provide structural materials for furniture, planters and raised beds.

Building items from pallets can be DIY projects or even activities used with populations as therapeutic horticulture. Building & Planting a Pallet Garden, published as a THAD, is one example.

A few tips to keep in mind:

- Prep pallets - sand/remove splinters
- Use metal screws
- Pallets fumigated with pesticides should not be used for edibles

Ideas and photos from Jennifer Poindexter demonstrate the versatility of pallets:

- Build a bottle and pallet herb garden for extra recycling mission
- A pallet table can accommodate an herb garden down its center
- Pathways (for wet or rough areas) can use whole pallets intact
- Self-supported pallet garden with feet provides an upright garden area
- Patio using pallets for floor, privacy fence and planters creates outdoor space



Poindexter, J. (2026). 43 gorgeous DIY pallet garden ideas to upcycle your wooden pallets. *Morningchores.com*.

Resources Spring 2026


Photo: Hope Blooms

Hope Blooms, non-profit is focused on working with youth, enriching their lives and reducing food security using innovative agriculture and culinary programs supporting youth as change agents who can and are contributing to the community. Their programs include:

Youth Organic Urban Agriculture Program using hands-on food growing in a large seasonal garden and greenhouse for horticulture skill acquisition with a mixed science, tech, engineering and STEM focus.

Food Without Borders and Cultural Arts Program for both youth and community members who come together to cook meals from their country of origin, serving these to more than 200 people, unifying the community, promoting diversity and multicultural environments.

Culinary Arts Program for youth 12-18 years can participate in an afterschool weekly program led by Chef and Manager of Food Programs at Hope Blooms based on Culinary Institute's first-year course, and includes food literacy skills, meal preparations for community, and culinary competitions.

Fair Food Farmer's Market offers food with greater degree of dignity where community members choose their own food to take home, with those who can pay using crypto app, avoiding any stigma to who is paying and who needs food help.

Publisher & Editor in Chief Lesley Fleming, HTR

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We would like to acknowledge Nova Scotia is traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq people. We are grateful for Peace and Friendship treaties. We are all Treaty people.